



'If at first you
don't succeed ...
you don't succeed'

Adult participation in learning has clear benefits, to individuals, to communities and to the economy, but, with the learning gap between the educational haves and have-nots widening, it remains a minority activity among adults in the UK, write **ALAN TUCKETT** and **FIONA ALDRIDGE**

There is widespread agreement that participation in learning makes a difference to the economic and social wellbeing of individuals, families, communities and nations. Learning is good for your health, for your longevity, and for the level of social cohesion in the community in which you live. In addition, learning leaks – the enthusiasm of people fired by learning is infectious, and knowledge and skills acquired for one purpose can often be put to use in others. The children of parents who are active learners fare better in their own education. Increasingly, the economic prosperity of the country also depends on people becoming more skilled, innovative and capable through continuing study. In short, participation in learning through the life span matters.

Yet, despite these clear benefits, active participation in learning remains a minority activity among adults in the United Kingdom, and the more education you had the first time round, the more likely you are to carry on learning as you get older. Much of the focus of public policy in post-compulsory education in the last 20 years has aimed to widen participation and achievement for people who missed out in initial education. For 20 years NIACE has mapped adult participation in learning each year through large representative sample surveys in order to identify how far these policies are succeeding, who benefits and who is losing out.

The 2009 survey comes at a time when public policy in England (though to a markedly more limited extent in the other national administrations of the UK) has, in the period since 2003, progressively shifted public investment away from courses of all sorts offered to all comers towards provision targeted at workers lacking formal qualifications, with increasing support for training offered at employers' premises. In less than three years a million and a half places in publicly provided courses in England were lost, and a very broadly based Campaigning Alliance for Lifelong Learning emerged to make the case for their restitution. The Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, John Denham, made no apology for the focus of investment on skills and can claim credit for extending opportunities to lower-skilled workers – albeit with a narrow and utilitarian diet of learning. However, at the same time, he launched a consultation on informal learning in which he made a welcome reassertion of the value of learning beyond the world of work. He asserted, too, that there was an explosion of new forms of learning – on the internet, through reading clubs, and in self-organised groups like the University of the Third Age, which needed to be recognised, and encouraged. That consultation led to the White Paper, *The Learning Revolution*, just as this year's NIACE survey was being completed.

The 2009 survey

At first glance, the 2009 survey offers comfort to government after months of criticism about the balance of its investment in adult learning opportunities. The total number of adults reporting current participation or engagement in learning over the last three years is 39 per cent, up one per cent on last year (with increases in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and no change in participation in England) – not enough to be statistically significant, but at least staunching the decline seen year on year from 2006 to 2008. Meanwhile, the Data Service reports that over the last year 320,600 adults gained a first full Level 2 qualification, up 36.5 per cent on 2006/7; 134,500 gained a full Level 3 qualification, a 17 per cent rise in the year; and 545,700 achieved Skills for Life qualifications – three per cent down on the previous year, but impressive nevertheless. So, taking our overall participation figures alongside the impressive rise in the numbers of adults securing qualifications, ministers will be quick to

claim that their policies are working – with public funding focused on those seeking qualifications and individuals investing in the bulk of other learning opportunities – whether in publicly or self-organised provision.

However, closer attention to the survey's findings tells a different and more worrying story, and offers little cause for optimism. The key message of the 2009 survey is that the proportion of adults currently learning (18 per cent) is at its lowest level since the Labour Government was elected in 1997 (see Table 1). In addition, the pattern of participation is changing, with the educational haves holding on to learning opportunities whilst participation among people who have benefited least from education declines markedly. The findings suggest that the real gains of a modest number of the least skilled are bought at the expense of many more of the educationally marginalised.

Table 1. Participation in learning – 1996, 1999, 2002, 2005, 2008 and 2009 compared

	1996	1999	2002	2005	2008	2009
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Current learning	23	22	23	19	20	18
Recent learning (in the last three years)	17	18	19	22	19	21
All current or recent learning	40	40	42	42	38	39
Past learning (more than three years ago)	23	23	21	24	26	24
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	36	37	36	35	36	37
Weighted base	4,755	5,205	5,885	5,053	5,033	4,917

Base: all respondents

The survey shows a widening learning divide by whichever measure is examined:

- The highest socio-economic groups – ABs and C1s – are at least twice as likely to be learning as those in the poorest, groups, DEs (see Table 2).
 - 25 per cent of ABs and 23 per cent of C1s are currently learning, compared with 11 per cent of DEs;
 - Current or recent participation by DEs has fallen to a 10-year low at 24 per cent, compared with 53 per cent for ABs;
 - 20 per cent of ABs say they have done no learning since school, compared with 55 per cent of DEs;
 - Current or recent participation by C2s has fallen back to the level (33 per cent) reported before the election of a Labour Government in 1997 after rising to 40 per cent in 2005.

Table 2. Participation in learning 2009, by socio-economic class

	Total	AB	C1	C2	DE
	%	%	%	%	%
Current learning	18	25	23	13	11
Recent learning (in the last three years)	21	28	25	21	13
All current or recent learning	39	53	48	33	24
Past learning (more than three years ago)	24	28	24	27	21
None since leaving full-time education/don't know	37	20	28	40	55
Weighted base	4,917	962	1,472	1,022	1,461

Base: all respondents

- People in full-time (47 per cent) and part-time work (49 per cent) are more likely to report current or recent participation in learning than unemployed people (40 per cent), and far more likely than people who are not in paid employment (27 per cent) or who are retired (16 per cent).
 - Current or recent participation among unemployed adults fell by three percentage points between 2008 and 2009, from 43 to 40 per cent whilst the numbers of unemployed have risen;
 - Current or recent participation among full-time workers rose by two percentage points between 2008 and 2009, although since 2002 it has fallen from 52 per cent to 47 per cent.
- In general, the older you are the less likely you are to take part in learning, with 20-24s (61 per cent) almost twice as likely as 55-64s (31 per cent), and more than three times as likely as 65-74s (18 per cent) – yet the Government’s Foresight study on mental well-being showed how learning has positive health benefits for older people.
- People who continued in initial education at 21 or later are more than twice as likely (55 per cent) to take up learning as people who left at the first opportunity (26 per cent). The gap is even greater among current learners (22 per cent among those who left at 21+; nine per cent among those who left at 16 or before).
- As in a number of NIACE surveys, ethnic minority adults overall report higher current participation (26 per cent) than white adults (17 per cent), a pattern repeated when current and recent participation are added (44 per cent compared with 38 per cent).
- Adults with no internet access are three times less likely to take part in learning (just six per cent reporting current participation) than adults with any internet access (22 per cent currently learning).
- People who are currently learning are far more likely to take up learning in the future. So the pattern of participation tends to reinforce the learning divide.

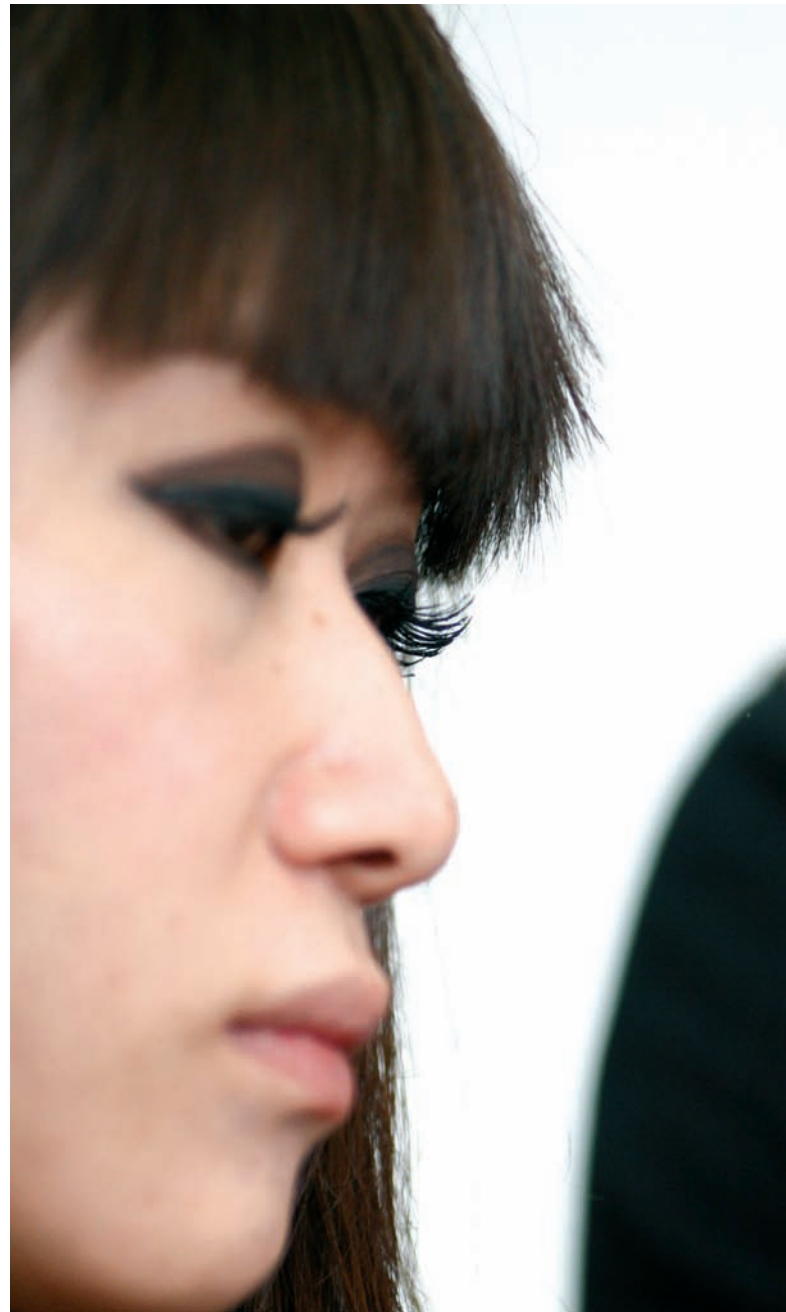
These are sobering findings for a government that has invested 52 per cent more in real terms in post-compulsory education and training since its 1997 election. They are more sobering still, when the trend charts outlined in the report are looked at. After impressive gains in its first five years in office there has been a marked decline in participation since the adoption of its skills strategies in 2003, 2005 and 2006. This is most noticeable when looking at the population by its employment status (see Table 3).

Table 3. Current or recent participation in learning by employment status – 1996, 2002 and 2009 compared

	1996	2002	2009
	%	%	%
Total sample	40	42	39
Full-time employment	49	52	47
Part-time employment	42	51	49
Unemployed	40	46	40
Not working	23	31	27
Retired	20	19	16
Weighted base	4,755	5,885	4,917

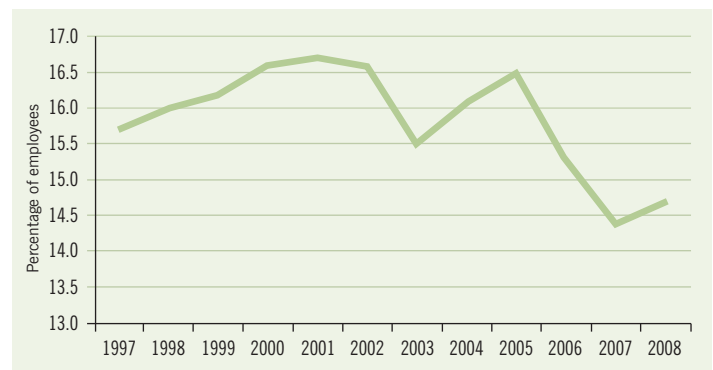
Base: all respondents

Clearly, retired people have paid a price in the re-balancing of public investment. But, as these figures show, this has not been to the benefit either of workers or of unemployed people. In part, the reason for this must lie in the pattern of access to learning at work. As Figure 1, taken from the Labour Force Survey, demonstrates, people of working age reported declining volumes of participation in learning throughout the boom years, with the exception of a modest upturn in 2008. If, as successive National Employer Skills Surveys report, employers are spending more money on training and development they must be



spending it on ever smaller numbers of people. Clearly, some government investment has gone to make up for the decline in learning opportunities at work for many in the workforce. One major challenge for policy makers will be to find ways to reverse the decline of learning at work – where state investment alone has not staunched the drop in opportunities.

Figure 1: Percentage of employees receiving job-related education and training in the last 4 weeks, England Quarter 2



Source: Labour Force Survey, Q2 2000-2008



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This is an issue of key importance if we are to reverse the narrowing of participation reported here. As well as being more likely to participate in learning in the first instance, learners from socio-economic groups AB (36 per cent) are twice as likely as those in DE (18 per cent) to be learning at work. Where they are engaged in learning, DEs are correspondingly more reliant on learning through publicly funded institutions, and to learn through voluntary organisations or community facilities. Here, at last, is comfort for the Westminster Government's policy – suggesting that whilst few DEs currently take part, the approach adopted in *The Learning Revolution* White Paper may be of particular value to the least affluent and those furthest from the labour market. Investment deliver the Learning Revolution is, however, modest.

The price paid

Overall, the 2009 NIACE survey suggests that the time has come for the Government to consider the price paid, in England at least, for its skills strategy. It is clear that the opportunity to gain a first qualification for a small cohort of the least qualified is bought at the expense of engagement by large numbers of others from the same groups.

Ten years ago, Helena Kennedy summed up educational opportunity after school in Britain by arguing, 'If at first you don't succeed, you don't succeed'. For far too many people in the UK that

remains true – and the price is paid in restricted opportunities for them, for their children, and for our community life. No one should be denied access to learning in a civilised society – and to meet needs we have to have breadth as well as depth of opportunity, the chance to sate curiosity as well as the chance to achieve and progress.

Alan Tuckett is Chief Executive of NIACE. Fiona Aldridge is Programme Director, Research, at NIACE

Narrowing participation, the 2009 NIACE survey of adult participation in learning, undertaken for NIACE by RSGB, interviewed a weighted sample of 4,917 adults, aged 17 and over, in the UK in the period 18 February–1 March and 11–15 March 2009.

A range of questions was asked on adult participation in learning, on who should pay for learning and on media literacy. This report is mainly concerned with the findings from the following two questions on participation in learning. Additional reports will also be published on the full range of data throughout the year.